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->From the Editor's Keyboard "Saying it like it is!"
""""""""""""""""""""""""""""

Ever get the impression that the "problem-solvers" at BP are grasping at a lot of proverbial straws to "resolve" this oil leak catastrophe? It sure seems like it to me! It's certainly mind-boggling; and I can't imagine how long it's going to be before someone comes up with a good resolution to this "problem"!! We will be dealing with this situation for many years to come!

It's been another long week here, and I'm glad that it's finally over! The weather has cooled down somewhat, so for that I'm grateful. I can't deal with the heat and humidity like I could when I was younger. Don't get me wrong, I like hot weather, but I'd like to be able to enjoy it rather than spend 8-10 hours out working in it! But, I also have to admit that it's part of the job, so I really shouldn't complain too much. And, it's not too bad when I'm sitting on a huge tractor mower; I could be out doing some projects, standing on my feet for the same amount of time! So, I figure that as long as I spend most of my day sitting on a tractor cutting grass, I'll be better off. Hey, it's a great way to get a quick suntan!

Anyway, the weekend is here, and the opportunity to sleep in a little late is on the horizon. Time to get some projects done around the house, have a beer or two, get the barbecue grill fired up, and relax! Hope you get to do some of the same!

Until next time...

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PEOPLE ARE TALKING
compiled by Joe Mirando
joe@atarinews.org

Hidi ho friends and neighbors. Another week has come and gone, and there aren't enough messages in the newsgroup to make a decent column, so I'm going to bore you with more of my ramblings.

Of course, the big topic is the oil spill in the Gulf.

I do need to correct a couple of things I've said in past columns about "the spill". First, that a barrel of oil is 42 gallons, not 50 as I had thought. Second, the amount of oil that's spilling out of that sucker... it's MUCH higher than I had thought.

If I remember correctly, I had said that best estimates put it at 10,000 barrels of oil per day (which would put it at 420,000 gallons of oil per day).

The 'new best guess' is that there are "up to" 40,000 barrels (1.7 million gallons) of oil being spewed into the Gulf each day.

There are also 'experts' (I say it that way because I have no idea of just how expert any of them might be) saying now that there are actually two or three places where the oil is coming from, and that what BP is showing us is not the only source of the spill.

One of these experts went so far as to say that the only way to end this catastrophe is to insert a nuclear device into the well and blow it up.

HUH? Do WHAT now? You want to detonate a nuclear bomb underwater, deep in a well that's already spewing out millions of gallons of crude oil, along with thousands to tens of thousands of gallons of toxic chemical dispersants, and chance contaminating the entire Gulf... and perhaps the Atlantic too... with radioactivity? No thank you.

Most of the problem with our current situation, to be fair, is that we've never dealt with anything like this before. The pressure a mile under the surface is indescribably high. It's also cold. So cold that some of the gas that's being spewed out along with the oil is not gas.. it's forming crystals. That's why that first 'capture' hood didn't work. The stuff was 'freezing' on the inside of the pipes.

I'm not making excuses for BP or the government or anyone else. The fact is that this well is thousands of feet deep. The sea floor is 5,000 feet below sea level, and the well had been drilled at least 4,000 feet down from the sea floor. That's 9,000 feet below sea level. I doubt that most of us can fathom (no pun intended) the pressure involved. When under that kind of pressure, things just don't react like they do 'up here'. It's hard to know how materials and equipment are going to perform under that pressure and at that temperature, so I have no doubt but that all these highly paid executives and high-priced consultants are scratching their heads, trying to figure out what to try next that won't narrow the options down the road.

But c'mon, folks, using an A-bomb?

It does fill me with wonder, though, that the sea floor is belching out the amount of crude that it is. It's a simply mind boggling amount of stuff. And as I've said before, normally you have to pump something IN to a well to get the oil to shoot out. This must truly be a huge reserve of oil.

There are those who will (eventually) use this fact to point toward continuing drilling around the coasts (Louisiana Governor Jindal is doing it already)... we know (or at least believe) that there are reserves of oil under the sea floor. That, to me has never been in question. What IS in question is the wisdom of drilling for it.

And I'm not going to say "I told you so", first of all because I didn't. I

never thought that it was a waste of time to drill because there just wasn't anything to be found. I believed the assessments that there were/are large reserves of oil out there. My hesitance is mostly because I'm as willing to use the energy that this off-shore oil would produce as anyone else, whether its as gasoline in my car or electricity produced by burning the gas that comes along with the crude.

Yeah, I like energy too. I like to 'electric up' my house and run my laptop and drive my car to the store to buy stuff in plastic containers made from petroleum products. I LIKE the convenience and cost-effectiveness of what we have now. I think most of us do.

But I DO wish we had spent more time and money 30 years ago to find alternatives. Even now, we've stopped looking for alternatives. Whatever happened to ethanol? Remember how you couldn't swing an oil-soaked pelican without hitting somebody who had a new whiz-bang contraption designed to either make ethanol cheaper or use it more effectively. Whatever happened to THOSE guys?

My focus.. my main interest, I guess you could say.. has always been on space-based solar energy. I heard or read a very convincing statement years ago about almost all sources of energy on this planet originally coming from the sun. Think about it. The sun allows plants to grow. The plants die, get covered over and become petroleum. The sun allows trees to grow, the trees get cut down and burned for heat. The sun's gravity (along with the Moon's) powers the tides, giving us 'wave energy', the sun heats the atmosphere causing winds for wind turbines. No matter what you use for energy (with the exception of nuclear) it was all made possible by the sun.

So why not go right to the source and cut out the middlemen?

Yes, we need to do a lot of research and a lot of experimentation. But, unlike trying to fix that busted "riser" 5,000 feet under the sea, nothing we do about solar power will cut out options down the road. We'll always be able to try something else, something better. It's only a small fraction of the sun's energy that falls on the face of the Earth. Imagine being able to capture more. And maybe, down the road, being able to use it more efficiently.

I'm not talking about a Dyson Sphere, which for those of you who don't know is a constellation of satellites around a star to capture all of the radiant energy it throws off (and not a 'shell' or enclosure for the star as many have depicted it), but an array of satellites designed to capture energy from... maybe a dozen select spots on the Moon, with a way to transfer it to receiving stations on Earth is worth looking into, as is the idea of orbiting satellites... or better yet, satellites in the LaGrange point between the Sun and Earth.

And if that doesn't work, there are always other options, other ways of trying to capture energy from the Sun. And trying as many of them as we can, as soon as we can, just makes sense.

Of course, there IS one other source of power out there that I would LOVE to see tapped as a source of energy. And that is... The Cosmic Microwave Background... the 3-degree-above-absolute-zero microwave 'signal' that comes from everywhere in the Universe, almost completely uniform in all directions. No matter where you are in the Universe (or at least what we can observe of it), it's there. You wouldn't even have to worry about a star like the Sun powering things... stars grow old and die. The CMB is forever.

When I was younger (much younger), I bought my grandmother a "microwave leakage detector". It was this little boxy wand-looking thing that you put in front of the ’seal’ of your microwave door to see if there were microwaves escaping. If there are, the little needle on the dial jumps.

I checked to see what kind of battery it needed. To my surprise, it didn’t. I couldn’t figure out how it would be powered, since the gauge was obviously powered electrically.

Then it hit me... it was MICROWAVE powered! The microwaves leaking from the oven powered it! What a great idea!

Now granted, the CMB is much much weaker than the average microwave oven, but might it not be possible to grab some of this energy from all around us and turn it to our advantage? I mean, it IS incredibly low-power, but it’s out there, it’s everywhere, and its free.

[sigh] Maybe some day.

Well, that’s it for this week, friends and neighbors. Tune in again next week, same time, same station, and be ready to listen to what they are saying when...

PEOPLE ARE TALKING

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->In This Week’s Gaming Section - Gearing Up for E3 2010!
Nintendo 3DS Close to Others!
Violent Games Harmless!
And much more!

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->A-ONE’s Game Console Industry News - The Latest Gaming News!

Game Makers Gear Up for Splashiest E3 Yet

The world’s leading gaming hardware makers, hoping to reignite the slumping $60 billion industry, will unveil at E3 next week a range of futuristic gadgets designed to pull in a new generation of players.

Microsoft Corp is expected to announce a name and launch date for its "Project Natal" controller-free system at the annual Electronic Entertainment Expo in Los Angeles. Sony Corp will show off its competing Move motion-sensor, and Nintendo Co will give the first glimpse of its new 3D handheld device.

"This is the biggest hardware show we've had for years," said Wedbush Securities analyst Michael Pachter. "We haven't ever had hardware announcements from all three console guys at the same time. That's pretty revolutionary."

The rush of new technology comes just as the video game industry, which dwarfs the $10 billion domestic movie box office, needs it. Total U.S. industry sales - hardware, software and accessories - are down more than 10 percent to $4.7 billion this year through April, according to retail research firm NPD Group.

Analysts are betting on Microsoft and Nintendo to generate the most buzz, the former with a free-form motion-sensing game platform, and the latter with a 3D system that requires no glasses.

Microsoft's long-gestating Natal kicks off the festivities with what will almost certainly be a splashy, celebrity-sprinkled demonstration on Sunday.

The company - which has lost its mantle as world's largest technology company to Apple Inc - unveiled the peripheral device at last year's E3. This year, attendees will be keen to learn its actual name, what games Microsoft has lined up for it, and how much it will cost.

The company would not be drawn on any of those subjects before the show. Analyst price estimates for the three-camera device, which will be in stores by the holiday season, range from $50 to $200.

"Hardware sales tend to be the best stimulant to drive software sales," said Eric Handler, an analyst at MKM Partners. "Anything that can help hardware gain traction is welcome. It needs something, because software sales have been pretty bleak thus far this year."

The set-up - which allows for completely hands-free games and controlling the console with voice commands - is designed to appeal to casual players and newcomers who may not be aware of the product, rather than hardcore gamers, analysts said.

"The dilemma Microsoft faces is convincing the person who controls the console in each household to make the purchase when the device doesn't really do all that much for him," said Pachter. "It's his mom, sister or girlfriend who would like to use it, and they're not going to be aware of it unless Microsoft does an effective of job of marketing to them."

Hooking non-gamers is key to Microsoft's push to turn the Xbox into the whole family's living room entertainment center.

"If you get Natal into a household and you get more than the core gamer to use it, you suddenly have many more people to sell movies and music and other games to," said Pachter.

Yves Guillemot, chief executive of video game publisher Ubisoft, said gesture technology will broaden the appeal beyond male enthusiasts who adore complicated adventure, shooting and sports games, often referred to as "core" gamers.

"There are a lot of people that couldn't play core games; ... the interface before was too complex," he said in a telephone interview. "They (with gesture tools) will start with easy-to-play games and they

will move on to high-end games. It’s a good way to make people enter the industry."

Microsoft already offers Netflix movies and Zune music and videos through its Xbox Live online subscription. There has been talk that it will add Hulu TV shows to the service at E3, but Microsoft declined to comment on that this week.

Five years after its launch, there are more than 40 million Xbox 360s in homes and 23 million paying subscribers for Xbox Live, according to Microsoft. In a best-case scenario, Natal could extend the lifespan of the machine another four or five years, potentially boosting the number of installed consoles to 60 to 70 million, said Pachter.

Typically by the fifth year of sales, hardware demand crests, but software sales are fueled by a base of users.

Sony will also be touting its own motion-sensing technology, in the shape of the PlayStation Move controller.

The device - which looks like a TV remote with a colorful ball on its end - was unveiled in March and will be on the market this autumn for less than $100, according to Sony.

The product is aimed more at experienced gamers, analysts said, but Sony will be looking to pique interest among the owners of all 34 million PlayStation 3 consoles.

"Sony is trying to take what (Nintendo’s) Wii has done and take it to the next level, incorporating motion technologies into core, targeted games, first-person shooters and action games," said Jesse Divnich, an analyst at Electronic Entertainment Design and Research.

Rival Nintendo may yet make the biggest splash with its portable, three-dimensional gaming console called the 3DS.

The device, which has not yet been seen in public, will render 3D effects without glasses.

"This is the first time we are going to see 3D technology in a handheld device," said Divnich. "What does it look like? It’s hard to fathom because it’s never been seen before."

3D games have not caught on given the high price of 3D TVs, but Nintendo could kickstart that trend with a device under $300, said Divnich. It may also slow the migration of handheld game fans to Apple’s iPhone and Google Inc’s Android.

"Right now a lot of the growth is coming from Apple," said Handler. "This could be an interesting way to breathe life into Nintendo again."
(additional reporting by Franklin Paul in New York; Editing by Edwin Chan and Richard Chang)

Game Companies Ready To Show New Ways To Play

Video game makers are about to try to convince you that fancy 3-D screens, gesture-recognition cameras and ultra-sensitive motion controllers topped

with brightly glowing spheres are what you need to have a good time.

They'll do this as they try to emerge from a slump in the recession, which shocked a business long believed to be protected from, if not totally immune to, the workings of the broader economy.

Much of the industry's success this year is riding on whether Microsoft, Nintendo, Sony and game publishers are able to sway consumers toward new, maybe even pricey ways to experience games - even as free or inexpensive options on Facebook, smart phones and the iPad compete for their attention.

Beginning next week at E3, as the Electronic Entertainment Expo in Los Angeles is called, game companies will show off several new mechanisms for playing games. Among them will be Move, which is Sony's new motion controller for the PlayStation 3 and launches this fall, when it is expected to cost less than $100. A black remote with a color-changing ball on top, it builds on the success of the Nintendo Wii's popular motion-control wand, but it promises more precision. A camera called PlayStation Eye recognizes the glowing orb and uses it to track the remote's position in a 3-D space, further immersing players in the game.

Even so, Fidel Martinez may need a bit of convincing. The 19-year-old PlayStation 3 owner says he likes his button-filled video game controllers just fine, thank you. Walking out of New York's Nintendo World store recently after buying a wallet, Martinez said he doesn't think he'll buy Move.

"It's too weird," said Martinez. "The times I've played (motion-controlled) games has been strange. I'd rather use the old kind."

Sony is betting he'll change his mind. Richard Marks, senior researcher at the company and the brains behind Move, thinks the controller will appeal to gamers like Martinez, even if they snubbed the Wii's gesturing wand as kids' stuff.

"One of our design goals was to make sure it stood out as a completely different experience that has never been seen before," Marks said.

Serious gamers like Martinez are not the only ones on Sony's radar. The company has been pouring millions of dollars into marketing the PlayStation 3 with the tag line "It only does everything." The goal is to rope in consumers more likely to watch movies and play party games than shoot on-screen enemies for hours on end.

"In many regards we are treating the launch of Move like the launch of a new platform," said Peter Dille, senior vice president of marketing for Sony Computer Entertainment. "We believe (it) will help us expand the audience of PS3 users."

Microsoft, too, wants to expand its gaming audience - a concept Nintendo mastered with the 2006 launch of the Wii, which got moms, grandmas and grandpas playing alongside kids as young as 4 or 5.

Natal, Microsoft's upcoming game technology, uses a camera and gesture recognition to turn players' bodies into controllers. After the camera recognizes you - your body shape and movements down to the smallest toss of your hair, you'll be able to swing your hands to swipe at on-screen dodge balls or pretend you're Godzilla and smash virtual buildings with swing of your arm. You could even scan in your real-life skateboard to

ride a version of it in a game.

"This is really what we like to think of as the rebirth of our brand," said Dennis Durkin, chief operating officer of Microsoft's video game business. "We're trying to set the stage for the next 10 years."

To do that, Microsoft needs to keep appealing to its core gamer fans, mostly men in their 20s, 30s and 40s who count "Halo," "Call of Duty" and "Gears of War" among their favorite entertainment franchises. But, like Sony with the PlayStation 3, it's also selling the Xbox 360 to families as an all-in-one entertainment device. It already streams Netflix and connects to Facebook.

E3, which has events from Sunday through Thursday, is where many store chains will decide what games and gaming systems, and how many of them, to stock for the holiday shopping season. That period is crucial for the industry, which analysts say gets about 40 percent of its revenue in the final three months of the year.

Analyst firm DFC Intelligence estimates that the worldwide video game retail industry will reap revenue of $59.5 billion this year, down slightly from $60.4 billion in 2009 and well below the more than $68 billion in 2008.

Because the industry has yet to fully rebound from the recession, Jesse Divnich, an analyst with Electronic Entertainment Design and Research, called E3 an "inflection point," with game companies under pressure to impress.

While hardcore gamers have flocked to shooters and sequels with loyal predictability, newer, more "casual" players can be fickle. Largely responsible for the runaway success of the Wii, the players who dabble in video games as a hobby but not as a lifestyle can't be expected to spend $60 every time a new game comes out, even in a better economy. That's why it's important for game companies to sell a wide range of entertainment options.

"Something that is new, something that is true innovation, something that unlocks new experiences," said Microsoft's Durkin, is something families "are willing to pay for."

He may be right. Walking out of the Nintendo World store with her husband with some gifts for her daughter, stay-at-home mom Terri Marrone said she hadn't heard of the new motion controllers from Sony or Microsoft. The family has a Wii, and three Nintendo DS systems, one for each of their kids. As for another motion control system, one that doesn't even need a remote?

"We would definitely be interested," said Marrone, who lives in New Brunswick, N.J. "It sounds cool."

Nintendo 3DS 'Close To' PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360?

Could Nintendo's upcoming 3D DS be as powerful as Sony's PlayStation 3 or Microsoft's Xbox 360?

Here's a little story I'd like to tell, about raising expectations, then

sending them to...well...

Imagine a handheld gaming device powerful enough to rival the PS3 and Xbox 360 coming from the company most recently infamous for selling a galactic empire’s worth of consoles and gaming handhelds, all despite those devices crunching graphics with less than half the silicon mojo of its rivals.

That’s the popular takeaway from IGN’s preview of Nintendo’s upcoming 3D-based successor to its DS gaming handheld. (That, and another rumor that the Nvidia-Nintendo mobile Tegra chipset deal’s a bust.)

Writes IGN: "Several developers that have experienced 3DS in its current form have reported, off the record, that it has processing capabilities that far exceed the Nintendo Wii and bring the device with abilities that are close to HD consoles such as PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360."

The 3DS won’t just zip past the DS in processing oomph, it’ll blast past the low-flying Wii and settle into orbit alongside the PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360?

Am I kidding? I’m not kidding, though I’m pretty sure the "developer sources" teasing IGN are.

What if it’s true? It’s not, but even if it’s ’half’-true, i.e. Wii-caliber processing power, watch out Microsoft and Sony. The Nintendo DS’s outsold everything this generation, and it’s about to snatch the PS2’s crown for most units sold ever (retail sales tracker NPD Group estimates that’ll happen sometime this fall).

3D For PlayStation 3 Games (But Not Blu-ray) Dropping Tomorrow

Grab your Dramamine and couch-sickness bags, Sony’s long anticipated 3D update for its PlayStation 3 video game console will finally be available tomorrow.

In a post to Sony’s official PlayStation blog, hardware marketing director John Koller writes "the moment is here...starting tomorrow, high-definition stereoscopic 3D gaming will be available in your very own living rooms!"

The update likely comes as part of firmware update 3.40, earlier rumored to be breaking tomorrow as well. The update coincides with the paper launch (pre-orders, shipping later this month) of Sony’s 3D-ready XBR-LX900 series of edge-lit LED televisions. The flagship model tops out at 60-inches, a $5,000 monster refreshing at 240Hz and packing an anti-glare panel, integrated Wi-Fi, automatic backlight dimming, and of course, the
requisite 3D glasses (two pairs, in fact).

So yes, the firmware update is free, like all prior PS3 firmware updates, but the /actual/ cost of availing yourself of Sony’s entry into the 3D cosmos equals the time it takes to download said update (negligible) along with the rather not-so-negligible cost of a brand new boutique-caliber TV.

Sony says the first round of 3D games will include futuristic racing game WipEout HD, asteroid-blaster Super Stardust HD, comedy-physics body-flinger PAIN, and a demo for buggy-racer MotorStorm Pacific Rift. While the demo’s

free, the other games aren’t, though Sony says that if you pick up a Bravia 3D TV, it’ll come with a voucher to download them gratis.

Sony adds that its pugilistic PlayStation Move game, The Fight: Lights Out, will also support 3D when it ships later this year with the company’s motion-control solution. (We’ll probably see how that actually works at E3 next week.)

On a down note, the company’s 3D Blu-ray update won’t be part of tomorrow’s pulldown, and instead will be available sometime "this year via firmware update."

’Back to Future,’ ’Jurassic Park’ To Become Games

Telltale Games is going back in time for a new series of video games.

The developer is creating episodic titles based on the "Back to the Future" and "Jurassic Park" franchises. The popular Universal Studios film trilogies spawned several games in their heyday in the ’80s and ’90s but have been absent from the interactive realm. The as-yet-untitled Xbox 360, PlayStation 3, Wii, PC and Mac games are set to be released this winter.

"I think it’s a prime time to reintroduce these properties in the digital world," said Dan Connors, CEO at Telltale Games. "Telltale Games has always set out to be a great storytelling company. We’ve been honing our chops over the past six years, and we’re ready to take on these two iconic properties and continue to advance storytelling in games."

Telltale Games previously created episodic games based on Aardman Animations’ Oscar-winning animated film series "Wallace and Gromit," Steve Purcell’s comic series "Sam and Max" and Matt Chapman’s online cartoon "Homestar Runner." The San Rafael, Calif.-based developer approached Universal Studios when looking for inspiration for their next game series.

"’Jurassic Park’ and ’Back to the Future’ are two of our broadest and most beloved properties," said Bill Kispert, interactive vice president at Universal Studios. "We were very interested in bringing them into the interactive space, but they’re not exactly the kind of properties that lend themselves to the stereotypical shoot-’em-up style of gameplay."

Connors said the games, which are in the early stages of development, would tell new stories extending the "Back to the Future" and "Jurassic Park" lore. He teased that the "Back to the Future" games may include a DeLorean ride back to the 1970s while the "Jurassic Park" games would be intense and add new backstories to the series’ man-versus-dinosaur mythology.

"The games are going to exist within these worlds," said Connors. "I wouldn’t call these games sequels per se but a new interpretation of their worlds for a new medium. For one generation, it’s an introduction to these series. For another generation, it’s a thing they can look back on and something they can share warmly with their family and friends."

Violent Videogames Harmless for Most Kids

Violent videogames can increase aggression and hostility in some players but they can also benefit others by honing their visual/spatial skills and improving social networking ability, scientists said.

In a special issue of the journal Review of General Psychology published by the American Psychological Association, researchers said the games can also help to control diabetes and pain and work as a tool to complement psychotherapy.

"Violent video games are like peanut butter," said Christopher J. Ferguson, of Texas A&M International University. "They are harmless for the vast majority of kids but are harmful to a small minority with pre-existing personality or mental health problems."

He added that studies have revealed that violent games have not created a generation of problem youngsters.

"Recent research has shown that as video games have become more popular, children in the United States and Europe are having fewer behavior problems, are less violent and score better on standardized tests," Ferguson, a guest editor for the journal, explained.

Patrick Markey, of Villanova University in Pennsylvania, found in a study of 118 teenagers that certain personality traits can predict which children will be negatively influenced by videogame.

If someone is easily upset, depressed and emotional or is indifferent to the feelings of other people, breaks rules and fails to keep promises, they may be more likely to be hostile after playing violent videogames.

"These results suggest that it is the simultaneous combination of these personality traits which yield a more powerful predictor of violent video games," Markey said. "Those who are negatively affected have pre-existing dispositions, which make them susceptible to such violent media."

But on a more positive note Pamela Kato, of University Medical Center in Utrecht in the Netherlands, showed in her research that specially tailored games can help to prevent asthma attacks, and ease pain management and diabetes treatment.

T. Atilla Ceranoglu, of Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston, discovered in a research review that videogames can also be used in psychological assessment of children and teenagers.

Health-Wise, Professional Gamers Are Practically Dead

In news that is probably not too shocking, professional gamers are not exactly the most physically fit individuals. While top gamers are as mentally agile as athletes, they are physically comparable to a 60-year-old chain-smoker, according to a study from England’s University of Essex.

Study author Dr. Dominic Micklewright pointed to one gamer who appeared

to be slim and healthy but actually "had the lung function and aerobic fitness of a heavy smoker in his sixties," the /Daily Telegraph/ reports. Micklewright blamed the 10-hour daily gaming sessions performed by most professional gamers and urged them to get active or risk heart disease down the line.

Mentally, however, gamers are in top shape. ’’Their reaction time, motor skill, competitiveness and emotions were pretty close," Micklewright told the /Telegraph/. "Elite athletes have unusually high levels of positive feelings and low levels of negative feelings such as depression and fatigue."

Micklewright collected his data at April’s Gadget Show Live in Birmingham, England.

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A-ONE’s Headline News
The Latest in Computer Technology News
Compiled by: Dana P. Jacobson

Global Cyber Security Experts To Meet in Estonia

Top cyber security experts will focus on the role of IT in national security at a meeting next week in Tallinn, an official at NATO’s Tallinn-based cyber defence centre said Wednesday.

"The conference will be attended by various cyber security experts and professionals from related disciplines in governments, military and academia to discuss the growing connection between computer security and national security," NATO cyber defence centre spokeswoman Liisa Tallinn told AFP.

The four-day international conference tackling the issue of cyber conflicts takes place in the Estonian capital June 15-18 and is organised by the Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence created by the NATO Western defence alliance in Tallinn.

Keynote speeches on cyber defence will be delivered by cryptographer Bruce Schneier and Melissa Hathaway, former cybercoordination executive for the US Office of the Director of National Intelligence, a position popularly known as "cyber czar".

Schneier is the author of several books on computer security and cryptography.

"When people in world want to know how IT security really works, they turn to Schneier," Tallinn said.

Charlie Miller, a known hacker of Mac products, will also attend the conference, Tallinn added.

Having joined both NATO and EU in 2004, Estonia suffered massive cyber

attacks on its institutions in the spring of 2007 amid a dispute with Russia over a Soviet war memorial. Moscow denied involvement.

Estonia, sometimes called also e-stonia for its IT savvy, has often been praised internationally for its IT innovations and various e-services widely used by its 1.3 million population.

Yahoo and Facebook Users Can Now Share Data

Yahoo and Facebook users around the world can now link their accounts to view and share updates with friends on both Web sites, Yahoo announced Monday.

Yahoo users can now view their Facebook News Feed via their Yahoo home page, Yahoo Mail, and other Yahoo sites, the company said. Additionally, content created on Yahoo sites, including Yahoo News, Sports, Movies and the photo-site Flickr, can be shared with friends on Facebook.

More Yahoo-Facebook integrations are also on the way, the company said.

The deal with Facebook is an effort "to give people one simple, trusted place to share information and connect. We think this offers great benefit to people across the Web, and it’s key to helping Yahoo extend our reach and increase engagement," Yahoo said in a statement.

Ethan Beard, director of Facebook Developer Network, was quoted in the Yahoo statement saying that, "by integrating with Facebook on a global scale, Yahoo is building upon an already valuable brand to give people easy ways to share the content they enjoy on Yahoo! with their friends on Facebook."

Yahoo offered more details of the way people can connect with Facebook sites on its blog, but Facebook remained mum on the issue early Monday, without any details in its press center, blog or twitter feed. The most recent communications on these pages largely addressed privacy concerns.

Yahoo said it is making privacy settings easier to use with a central dashboard called Yahoo Pulse, but a link to the new dashboard could not be accessed as of the time of this writing.

Yahoo and Facebook first announced a plan to integrate services much more closely last December. At the time, Yahoo users in the U.S. were able to call up their Facebook activity streams and post status updates from the Yahoo home page, as well as use buttons to share certain Yahoo content. The companies promised much more this year via the use of Facebook’s Connect technology across Yahoo sites.

Microsoft Could Buy AOL

Microsoft to buy AOL? That’s the rumor being floated by Business Insider’s Nicholas Carlson, who reports that insider sources have suggested that AOL’s next big search negotiation - as announced at this week’s D8 conference - is anything but.

In actuality, claims the source, the "negotiation" could be a direct sale to Microsoft, reducing the number of major search portal players in today's marketplace from three (MSN, Yahoo, AOL) to two (MSN and Yahoo).

Given AOL's track record thus far, it's not as far-fetched of a rumor as one might think. For starters, speculation ran rampant as to who might pick up the beleaguered web portal even before Time-Warner itself extinguished the two companies' relationship - panned by former Time-Warner CEO Gerald Levin as one of the worst business partnerships of recent memory - in mid-2009.

Yahoo and AOL were in advanced stages of talks in late 2008 before their proposed merger fell apart, even going so far as to discuss the Web portal one might reach upon typing, "aol.com" into a given browser.

Although Carlson cites a source who claims that the proposed Microsoft purchase might be delayed until AOL can pull itself out of its quarterly slumps, the company announced that it had shed off 28 percent of dial-up service revenues and 19 percent of its advertising revenues in this past April's earnings announcement - he nevertheless thinks that the deal is going to go down sooner than later.

Microsoft, after all, is feverish to get itself higher in the search market business against rival Google. Yet, it's doubtful that the latter would ever want to go after a company like AOL - content-creation isn't really Google's forte, nor its desire. While $2 or $3 billion asking price would be a costly sum for Microsoft to put up, it's leagues under the company's $44.6-billion bid for Yahoo in early 2008. As well, Microsoft could easily cut costs by eliminating the operational redundancy and inefficiency created by a theoretical MSN-AOL mash-up.

However, not everyone in the business world is as on-board with the idea as Carlson.

"While there is strong strategic rationale behind such a deal, [it] doesn't seem likely," said Clayton Moran, an analyst for Benchmark Co., in an interview with Reuters. "We think Time Warner pursued a sale of AOL prior to spinning it out and wasn't able to find an interested enough buyer."

China Says It Will Keep Blocking Online Content

China vowed Tuesday to keep a tight grip on the Internet, saying it would continue to block anything considered subversive or threatening to "national unity."

The "white paper" statement of government policy was released three months after a public dispute over censorship prompted Google Inc. to shut its mainland-based search engine.

It said there were 384 million Internet users in China at the end of 2009, about 29 percent of the population. The government aims to boost that to 45 percent in the next five years by pushing into rural areas where the white paper said there was a "digital gap."

It said the Internet had taken an "irreplaceable role in accelerating the development of the national economy" and would continue to impact daily work, education and lifestyles.

But China, which routinely blocks websites such as Facebook, YouTube and Twitter, gave no sign there would be an easing of the "Great Firewall" - the nickname for the network of filters that keep mainland Web surfers from accessing material the government deems sensitive.

The official English translation of the white paper favorably mentions Twitter - an apparent glitch since the U.S. microblogging service has been banned in China since last year. The English version named Twitter as an example of a fast-growing service that allows people to express themselves, while the Chinese version mentions only micro-blogs.

The 31-page white paper did not give specific examples of what content would be banned, saying Chinese laws prohibit the spread of "contents subverting state power, undermining national unity, infringing upon national honor and interests, inciting ethnic hatred and secession" as well as such things as pornography and terror.

The white paper also put the onus on companies to block content deemed sensitive, saying China required Internet service providers to set up "Internet security management systems and utilize technical measures to prevent the transmission of all types of illegal information."

Google ran afoul of the government when it accused Chinese hackers of trying to plunder its software coding and of hijacking the Gmail accounts of human rights activists, and said it would stop self-censoring its search results in line with Chinese regulations.

It moved its search service to the freer Chinese territory of Hong Kong in March.

The white paper did not mention Google, but said anyone using the Internet in China had to respect its laws. "Within Chinese territory the Internet is under the jurisdiction of Chinese sovereignty. The Internet sovereignty of China should be respected and protected," it said.

Spanish Court Dismisses File-Sharing Appeal

A Spanish court has dismissed an appeal against a file-sharing site with a ruling that may be one of the most severe legal defeats for the entertainment industry in its fight against copyright infringers.

The Web site, cvcdgo.com, linked to content that had been posted on peer-to-peer file-sharing networks without permission of the copyright holders.

In May 2009 a Madrid court dismissed the case, which was brought by Egeda, an audiovisual collection society, along with Columbia Tristar. An appeal was dismissed by the court last week.

The court found that the Web site did not store the content and that it linked to files that "are found in different computers around the world," according to the Spanish-language ruling.

The three-judge panel also found that "no one receives any type of economic benefit" from linking to the content, although the site did have advertising.

In other countries such as the U.S., defendants can be found guilty of inducing infringement even if their sites only contain links that lead to content shared without proper permission.

An official reached at Egeda did not have an immediate comment on the ruling.

HP ePrint Machines Use E-Mail To Print Documents

On Monday, Hewlett-Packard unveiled the next generation of printers. ePrint printers are web-enabled, work in the cloud, and will print from e-mail. In addition, users can store documents or files in the cloud for direct printing on demand. Prices start at $99.

The HP printers are the first with the ability to talk to the Google cloud without needing a local proxy PC or web appliance. That means people can access Google Docs, photos and calendar directly from their printers. Companies like Yahoo, Facebook and Reuters are also making print apps that work with the new machines.

"This is HP making printers relevant again. Over the last few years, printers were increasingly irrelevant," said Rob Enderle, principal analyst at the Enderle Group. "People are living on the web and printers were an anachronism looking back to the past before we had the web. By integrating the web into printers, suddenly they are relevant again."

HP offers several "relevant" examples of how consumers can use the web-enabled printers with the ePrint platform. A mother and son can print drawings they created on the iPad. Or users can print from mobile devices like the Palm Pre or BlackBerry smartphone and pick up the documents at a FedEx Office store.

The HP ePrint printers come with a unique e-mail address that lets consumers print a document the same way they would send an e-mail message. Consumers can also send Microsoft Office documents, Adobe PDFs, JPEG images, and other file types using HP’s ePrintCenter. Documents are sent to the ePrintCenter’s e-mail address, which handles the image and sends it to an ePrint printer.

"As much as we talk about iPad and tablets, people don’t move from one type of thing to another very quickly. In fact, we’ve been talking about the paperless office since the early 90s and we are probably no closer now than we were then," Enderle said. "HP is recognizing that a web-connected printer is where the market wants to be. Maybe 50 years from now it won’t be, but we live in today."

The first generation of the ePrint printers includes the PhotoSmart e-All-in-One, the Photosmart Plus e-All-in-One, the PhotoSmart Premium e-All-in-One, and the PhotoSmart Premium Fax e-All-in-One. Prices range from $99 to $299.

Along with the ePrint printer, HP also announced a new service called Scheduled Delivery. The service lets consumers choose content to be pushed to a printer at a designated time each day or week. Consumers might choose, for example, to have a customized news feed printed in time for a 7 a.m. pickup.

As with most things digital, there is also an advertising hook with the Scheduled Delivery service. For example, HP and Yahoo plan to launch a pilot program to help marketers consider ways to provide added value to their audiences by populating select print content from partners with customized messages, promotions and information like coupons or local services.

Enderle expects HP's ePrint to be a big hit, especially for iPad users. "The iPad doesn't connect to a normal printer," he explained. "That was a huge complaint from iPad users who browse the web and they want to print out a boarding pass or directions."

Apple's Safari 5 Browser Runs Faster, Kills Ads

Apple late on Monday released Safari 5, the latest version of its browser, which includes a Safari Reader feature for viewing multipage articles on the Web.

The new browser, available for either the Mac or Windows at Apple.com/Safari, boasts a 30 percent increase in performance over Safari 4, plus the ability to select either Google, Yahoo, or Bing as the default search engine. Apple also claims that the Nitro Java engine inside of Safari 5 is three percent faster than Chrome 5.0, and over twice as fast as Firefox 3.6.

The launch of Safari 5 was expected at the announcement of the iPhone 4, but Apple chief executive Steve Jobs failed to mention it in his keynote address.

"Safari continues to lead the pack in performance, innovation and standards support," said Philip Schiller, Apple's senior vice president of worldwide product marketing, said in a statement. "Safari now runs on over 200 million devices worldwide and its open source WebKit engine runs on over 500 million devices."

The real innovation, however, is Safari Reader, which detects a multipage article and formats it into a single page. "When Safari 5 detects an article, users can click on the Reader icon in the Smart Address Field to display the entire article for clear, uninterrupted reading with options to enlarge, print or send via email," Apple said.

The biggest advantage - or disadvantage, to publishers - is that Safari Reader automatically strips out ads. And some graphics, for that matter. That means that while you might be able to read a multipage review without the ads, the slideshow and some associated graphics also disappear. (Viewers will likely view the first page of ads after the page loads and before the user can click on the "Reader" button.)

In the case of the ExtremeTech review, the Safari Reader button only appears on the third page, eliminating all the details of the background introduction.

Safari Reader senses when a single- or multi-age article is available, and displays an innocuous-looking "Reader" button at the right end of the address bar. When clicked, the Reader abstracts the text into a semi-transparent window, which can be scrolled down or shared with other

users via email.

Not surprisingly, Safari 5 aims to be HTML5 compliant, with the addition of HTML5 Geolocation, HTML5 sectioning elements, HTML5 draggable attribute, HTML5 forms validation, HTML5 Ruby, HTML5 AJAX History, EventSource and WebSocket, according to Apple. An Extension Builder, new in Safari 5, simplifies the development, installation and packaging of extensions, Apple said.

PTA Joins with Facebook To Promote Internet Safety

The PTA and Facebook are joining forces to promote Internet safety through a set of tools and resources for kids, schools and parents.

The world's largest online social network and the National PTA will work together to build a program to provide information and support about such issues as cyberbullying, good online citizenship and Internet security.

Because the partnership is just starting, officials do not have much detail on what kinds of resources they plan to offer through their respective websites and through other means. But Facebook spokesman Barry Schnitt said the plan is not just to educate kids about being on Facebook, but about being online.

He said "the sooner we can get instilling responsible behavior, the better."

The PTA will reach out to local parent-teacher groups to promote the program, while Facebook plans to do the same on its site.

Anne Collier, co-director of Connectsafely.org, a forum about online safety issues, said the deal combining Facebook's broad reach and the PTA's relationship with schools and parents "makes a lot of sense."

"Citizenship online and offline needs to be a part of the child's life," she said. "It needs to be taught at school and at home - it's not just a digital thing."

Child safety advocate Parry Aftab also welcomed the program, and said it's important for parents not to be scared of technology but to use it to their advantage to communicate with their kids.

"It's not about turning it off any more, it's not about scare tactics," Aftab said. "It's all about teaching our kids the skills they need to survive in this digital world."

Software Lets Students Take Exams at Leisure

British students might soon have the chance to take college exams in their own bedrooms at any time of the day or night - without being able to cheat.

U.S. firm Software Secure has developed a programme which is designed to make sure students stay honest while taking the exam by keeping them

under surveillance and cutting off any access to cribbing material.

The software firstly locks down the use of all files and the internet, other than those specifically needed for the exam.

It then asks for a fingerprint test to ensure the candidate is the correct person and uses audio and video recording to ensure that the student is under exam conditions during the whole period.

The firm says on its website that it "brings the exam room into the computer age, making exam time less stressful for students, faculty and administrators."

At least one college in Britain, the University of Wales Institute, Cardiff, is experimenting with the system and others may follow suit. Several universities in the United States already have the system in place.

The National Union of Students gave the idea a cautious welcome.

"It would be one solution to problems faced by those who might have difficulty reaching a university campus for exams," said a spokesman.

"However it must not be used as an excuse to further cut costs or corners by reducing the amount of contact time students have with staff."

The company says it was designed for students with full-time jobs, or who have children and don’t have the flexibility to find an invigilator.

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